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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses personal resource discovery on the World Wide Web from the point of view of a reference librarian. Two key questions for finding information on the Internet are identified: (1) What are you actually looking for? and (2) Who is likely to have the information? Examples of this approach are provided, and some problems with using search engines are noted. Two Web sites for finding information in the ".gov domain" (government information) are suggested, as well as recommendations for finding sources in the ".org" (organizations), ".edu" (educational), and ".com" (commercial) domains. A Web page from the University of Queensland (Australia) Library that lists recommended Web sites is included. (MES)

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Making the Most of the Web

By: Belinda Weaver

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Proceedings

Making the Most of the Web

Belinda Weaver

My talk today will be more about personal resource discovery. As a reference librarian and an Internet trainer, I have begun to rethink the way I use and teach the Web. When the Web first came along, it was hard to get a handle on it. We needed search tools to find what was good on the Net because it wasn't organised in a way we could relate to. Many sites - think government - had not embraced the Web in the way they have now. Sites like Yahoo developed very quickly because there was such a demand for navigation round the Web.

But things have changed, and changed mightily.

There are all kinds of different search tools now. There are search tools for newspaper archives, there are search tools for newsgroup discussions. There are subject pages - both specific and general - and wonderful subject gateways and portals. There are finding tools for images and music and movies. There are search engines and meta-search engines. Even the search engines we think we know keep changing on us.

So it's a shifting environment - one it's impossible to keep up with.

The good news is you don't have to.

Search tools on the Web are like fashion in clothing. Something new is always being announced, the hype gets intense, and a certain anxiety is generated. You feel you'll miss out on something if you don't get on the bandwagon.

But what is really new in searching? Google was new. But that was launched in beta nearly two years ago. Despite hyping and size-boasting (we're the biggest), nothing better than Google has come along since.

And even Google isn't that wonderful. Can it get you the exact thing you want, when you want it?

I don't think so.

The Web is not an unstructured muddle - it only seems that way when you search and results are returned in a meaningless jumble. I hardly ever search - I think it's an almost total waste of time - yet I find what I want 99% of the time. How?

I think like a reference librarian. Even in the new world of the Internet, the key questions are what they've always been -

- What are you actually looking for?
- Who is likely to have the information?

One you know those, you can FIND THE SOURCE. (In the old days, it might have been a reference book - a Whitaker's Amanack, or a Statistical Yearbook. These days it's more likely to be a Web site, or an online database.)

It's perfectly possible to adapt existing reference-style thinking and practices to Web work. The main thing is not to panic, and not to be sucked into hype-anxiety.

This approach WORKS.

Example

As a newly qualified reference librarian, I was once stumped by a user asking about the most frequently used letter in the English alphabet. I wanted to succeed - he was handsome and I wanted to impress him. I also thought I had to seem to know everything, had to be infallible. It takes time to feel comfortable enough with what you do know to admit what you don't know. I panicked about this request, but when I asked myself - who would need to know that? - my mind started working. I thought codebreakers. I found a book on codebreaking and I had my answer.

I still operate in the same way. If someone asks me for, say, information on genetically-modified food - I think CSIRO. The Federal Government would also have information. Female circumcision - that's a human rights issue - what about trying Amnesty International or other human rights organisations? Digital TV and datacasting - I'd try the Australian Broadcasting Authority and also the government for latest news, press releases and so on. Tourism numbers - the ABS, obviously. Reconciliation - I'd try ATSIC and the Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation. The latest on Kosovo? I'd look at BBC news archives, online Balkan newspapers and possibly the UN High Commissioner for Refugees.

You could use search engines to try find these kinds of things, but (a) the link returns are too jumbled, (b) the top links (which are probably all you'd want to look at) may be worthless, (c) there's no guarantee that you will find what you want and (d) it takes too long to work out whether you can trust what you find. You don't have that problem with known sources - if you're looking for information at a government site or a reputable organisation, then you know whom you're dealing with.

Search engines exist to make money from advertising. Like banks, they're more interested in profits than services. So don't feel guilty about deserting them. I don't. It's like the moment you give up the desire to be in fashion - first there's anxiety, then relief. Internet anxiety is created to make money for someone. Don't be sucked in.

I also think it's dangerous to teach our users that they can press a button and out will come the answers they seek. What about provenance of information - the key to credibility?

My approach is not so much about focusing on questions, but focusing on answers, and who is likely to have those answers.

I was recently asked to find Senator Herron's submission to the Stolen Generations inquiry. Two different librarians had spent more than an hour searching for it. They had found references to it, critiques of it, but they hadn't found the thing itself. I said: 'Give me five minutes'. (We set ourselves these silly challenges all the time to keep things interesting.) And I found the submission. Not by searching, but by going to the Senate Committees Web page and tunnelling down through there.

The search tool I used was not a computer or a robot or a spider, but my own brain, my own memory. I'd been to the Parliamentary site before. I'd linked to Parliamentary committees through my Web pages. So I knew the information was there. But even if I hadn't been to the site before, I would still have tried there first. You want something from government, you go to government to look.

It makes sense.

Our brains, our memories - these are the tools librarians need to concentrate on. Internet search tools are improving all the time, but they are still very blunt instruments. Our brains can do a sharper, more focused job.

What librarians need is not so much Web knowledge, but GENERAL knowledge - knowledge about the way the world works and where information actually comes from. That means knowing how the government works, knowing about organisations, knowing about who publishes, and why. When you're looking for sources, instead of 'information', it all gets a LOT easier.

To locate sources, I use existing expertise. A lot of librarians out there have done a huge job in organising, listing and annotating resources. Why not use their expertise and follow the links they have made? Again, it makes sense.

These days, most sites have the following sections -

- About us - their mission, goals and objectives
- Contacts - I often use the provided email links to ask for information
- Publications - you'll generally get a list, but you may also get many publications in full text
- Services - what they can do for you
- Search facility

So you can already find out a lot just by visiting one place. The links it will provide will swing you on further. And it's much quicker to use search facilities at the site where information is likely to be found, than to waste time using search engines to locate it. The Senate Committee report is proof of that.

If you try to use a search engine to locate a report, you get links where the report is mentioned, announced, criticised, but it's often slow, frustrating and time-consuming to GET TO THE REPORT itself. So don't search.

I use existing structures to help me understand the Web.

The main structures I use are domains. (You may want to work out your own mental models). There are only six domains, you'll mainly use four - GOV COM EDU ORG. Find the main addresses in each and use them as your springboard. Use the handout I've given you today.

To find sources in the .gov domain - you only need two addresses

- Australian Government Entry Point - much better now as an entry point as the metadta added to records has improved searching no end
- Governments on the WWW - tremendous site for finding governments elsewhere - includes links to governments, departments, agencies, embassies, coutnry data, election information, lanuguages, the flag, geography etc.

Really get to know these - have a really thorough look.

Finding sources in the .org and .asn domain. There are several good online directories, such as the UIA, Social and Political NGOs, and others. It's also worth looking for professional organisations in the subject you're interested in. They often have useful links to other similar organisations. Organisations really are a great source of current information. I would suggest you find the main organisations in your topic and get to know them thoroughly. To find them, try the online directories, and try Virtual Reference Collections. My own Australian journalists' guide will furnish more. And don't forget the United Nations! It (and its subsidiary organisations and agencies) is a major publisher of demographic, economic, health, educational and statistical information and there are a range of tools now that make using the UN sites less daunting.

Finding sources in the .edu domain. Use Braintrack Worldwide Unis. They list just about every college and university in the world, right down to obscure American colleges. You can get listings of schools in sites like Yahoo.

Finding sources in the .com.au and .com domain. Think about what you want - a balance sheet, background articles, an annual report, the latest share prices, market research. Once you know what you want, it's easier to know where to look.

What about keeping up with new stuff?

I use a range of tools to keep up to date with new materials. I maintain a What's New on the Web for the University of Queensland Library. You too could use similar tools to stay in touch with new materials. It's quick to scan them and you can easily filter out the stuff that isn't relevant.

- Scout report (x4) (archived at Scout Signpost, so another good place to search for high-quality new resources)
- Internet Resources Newsletter - an academic listing from Heriot-Watt Uni in Scotland
- EdNA what's new - good because of the themed Australian content
- Researchbuzz - news and information on search tools
- LIIWEEK - email services from Librarian's Index to the Internet
- Journal current awareness - scan the Web columns in professional journals in your topic, as well as library-oriented ones such as Weaver's Web in inCite

You can find links to all these through the UQ Library page What's New on the Web - see handout.

There are other tools you need to be up with - find them through the UQ Library search tools page.

- Software finders (Tucows) for finding plugins and helper apps
- Online discussions (Deja) - for searching past postings to USENET news
- Databases (Invisible Web) - MEDLINE, ERIC, Agricola, and other bibliographic, statistical, full-text, legislative, etc. The search engines can't see inside these databases and they are very rich resources for librarians and researchers

If you absolutely, positively have to search ...

Start with a subject page - when you know absolutely nothing about a subject and need a start (try BUBL and WWVL)

Use a search engine - when you have a name or long phrase to find - use Google or FastSearch

My steps to success

- Try a known source
- Try a good subject page such as WWWVL orBUBL
- Then search if you must

Search engines will get better and better. That's good. But don't forget that your brain is the best search tool you'll ever have.

Government domain (.gov sites)

- **Australian Government Entry Point**

  http://www.fed.gov.au/

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- **Governments on the WWW**

http://www.gksoft.com/govt/en/

Educational domain (.edu and .ac sites)

- **Braintrack Worldwide Universities**

http://www.braintrack.com/

Organisations domain (.org and .asn sites)

- **Guide to Internet information sources for Australian journalists - organisations**

http://www.uq.edu.au/jrn/ozguide/orgs.html

- **World Directory of Think Tanks**

http://www.nira.go.jp/ice/tt-info/nwdtt99/

Commercial domain (.com and .co sites)

Australian information

- **Australia on Display**

http://www.austrade.gov.au/AOD/index.asp

- **Australian Financial Services Directory**

http://www.afsd.com.au/

- **Stock Exchange**

http://www.asx.com.au/

- **Australian Securities & Investment Commission**

http://www.asic.gov.au/

- **Annual Reports (Top 500 Australian companies)**

http://www.connect4.com.au/

US & International information

- **Hoovers**

http://www.hoovers.com/

- **Corporate Information**

  http://www.corporateinformation.com/

- **CEOExpress**

  http://www.ceoexpress.com/

My own sites

- **Guide to Internet Information Sources for Australian Journalists (OzGuide)**

  http://www.uq.edu.au/jrn/ozguide/

- **Foreign Correspondent**

  http://www.uq.edu.au/jrn/fc/

- **Globalisation**

  http://www.uq.edu.au/jrn/global/

University of Queensland Library - selected pages

- **Home page**

  http://www.library.uq.edu.au/

- **What's New on the Web**

  http://www.library.uq.edu.au/internet/new/webnew.html

  includes links to a selection of 'keeping Current' tools

- **Virtual Reference Collection**

  http://www.library.uq.edu.au/internet/vref.html

  Dictionaries, encyclopaedias, translators, directories, biographies ...

- **Internet Search Tools**

  http://www.library.uq.edu.au/internet/schhints.html

Subject pages, search engines, meta-search tools, newspaper archive search tools, online discussions, Web site announcement archives, business and government search tools

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